



Refugees, women, and the 1971 War—a reflection

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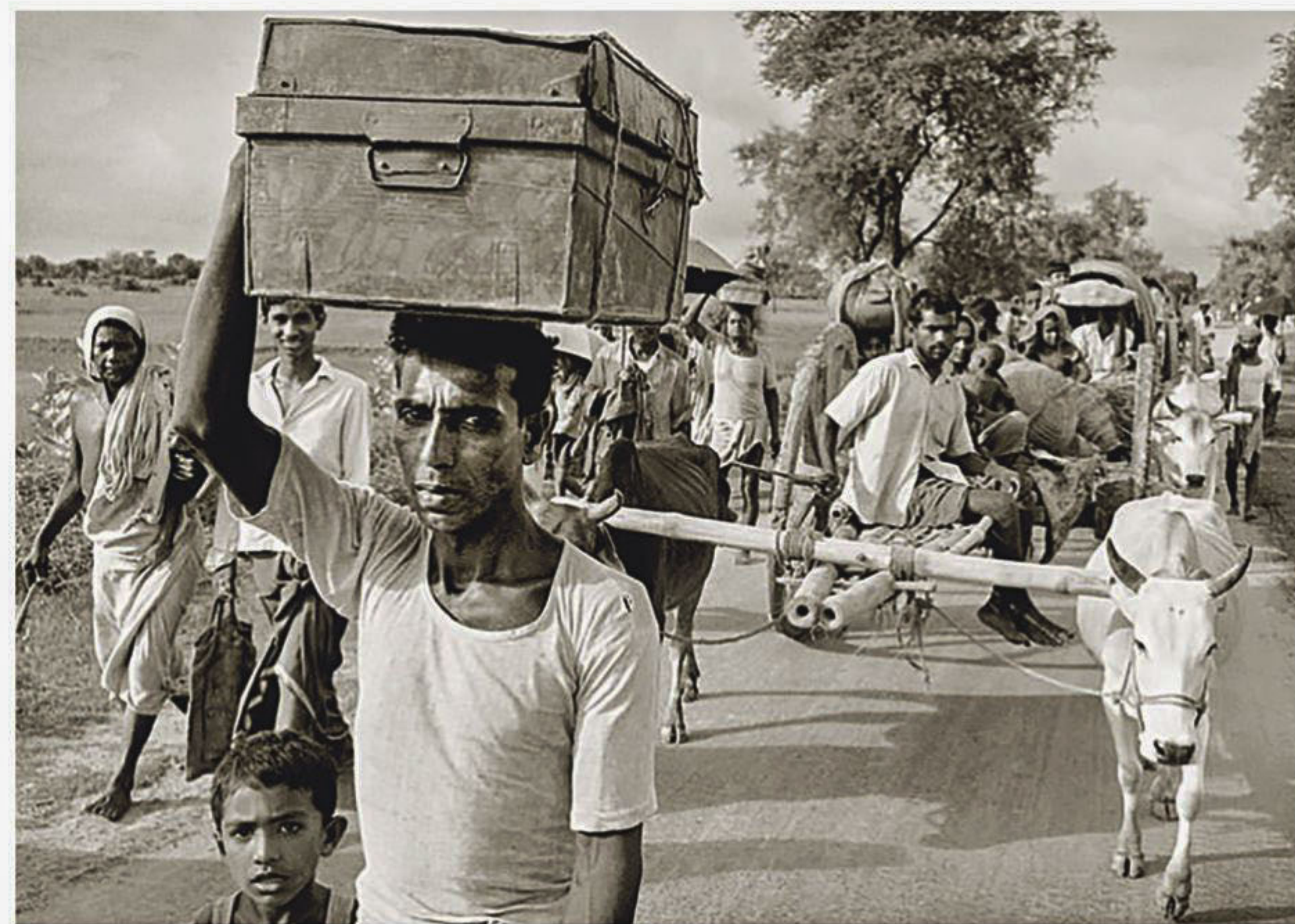
We all know that 10 million people—one-seventh of the population in 1971—fled to India during our War of Independence in 1971. While there has been some work on the Mujibnagar Government and key political figures, what is missing from such studies is the voice of the common person who left everything behind to find refuge in an impoverished, neighbouring state. How did they fare? What was their journey like? What did homecoming look like? We hear little about the ordinary people who trekked there and back, especially the women who undertook this perilous journey.

The exodus began in April. In the first month, three million refugees entered India. By June, the monthly influx fell to below a million a month; in the month of December, before victory was declared, 166,000 people entered India as refugees. The main entry-points into India were through Khulna/Jessore, Rajshahi, Mymensingh, Sylhet, and Chittagong. Almost half of the refugee population went to West Bengal, a popular choice because of better roads and access as well as shared language and ethnicity.

As part of a research project some time ago, I had the chance to speak to fifty returned refugees, mostly women, in

Khulna. At the outbreak of the war, they had left their homes and walked all the way to the border and into India. It took many days for them to get there with their children and a few belongings. While some of them fled due to the fear of violence, others left after having faced violence—physical, sometimes sexual. Many of their husbands could not join them because they were either dead or had joined the war effort. They were anxious as they crossed over the border, and many found camp life difficult.

State violence is not only about actual acts of violence but also about the aftermath and consequences of such acts and the use of force. Entire families had to abandon their homes. Absent husbands meant that the responsibility for looking after the extended family fell on the women. The perilous journey by foot over multiple days put them at risk for different types of violence—some got mugged, for example. At border crossings, they felt vulnerable because the border guards were all male. Once in the camps, they realised they faced other challenges. They worried there could be sexual predators around. They didn't like being mistreated, obviously, but couldn't trust those who behaved well either. It was a period of anxiety for most women, who while grateful to have escaped immediate



Bengalis fleeing for a safe refuge.

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violence, could not feel safe in exile. Added to these were concerns about how long they would have to live in limbo, when could they return, what was happening to those who had gone off to fight or who had stayed behind.

This view of the refugee experience is

not a popular one, in part perhaps because we always want to show how grateful we are for India's support, and thus focus on the single image of Indian benevolence and humanitarianism. While the protection given to the 10 million refugees was significant, the life of the ordinary refugee was marred by all kinds of fears and worries. Seven million people were scattered across the 825 refugee camps along the border. On average, then, each camp housed around 8,000 refugees. This was a time when the Indian economy was weak and Indira Gandhi was under severe pressure to lessen the "burden". While common people were sympathetic, the conditions in the camps were dire.

From my interviews with the women who returned, it seemed as though the high density of refugees in the camps made them see themselves as a unit. In groups, they kept up the spirit of the liberation struggle, driven by a sense of nationalism. Groups of women with children began to see themselves as part of a family. They were inspired by the freedom fighters who would visit to avail themselves of the training that the Indian Army provided to active participants in the war. Stories of war and the mere presence of the fighters kept the spirit of independence alive, allowing for greater unity and strengthening of national pride. In the camps refugees were forced to interact with one another and thus think together about their experience, the coloniser, the war, the coming freedom. Fleeing persecution and death, they bonded, forged a common identity, and developed new ideas about the homeland and what they expected from its liberation.

The decision to return home is perhaps the most poignant one that refugees undertake as a group. When the news of Bangladesh's victory was announced, celebrations spread across the camps and in the streets.



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A woman refugee at a Kolkata refugee camp holds a placard that reads, "They are human beings. Democracy or demockery??"

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